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SUBJECT: KOREAN MEDIA TAKES THE RIGHT LINE ON AFGHAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an August 6 meeting with Embassy Seoul PAO, a senior writer for one of Korea's three largest and most influential national dailies explained that the mainstream media have made a conscious editorial decision to advise Koreans not to blame the hostage crisis on the United States or allow it to be used as an excuse for cynical political attacks and anti-Americanism. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On August 6 PAO and Acting Deputy PAO met over lunch with Kim Young-hie, Senior Writer for Joong-ang Ilbo, who is viewed by many as the "Dean" of Korea's journalists. At 71 Mr. Kim remains fully engaged with his profession, penning a monthly column and contributing news analyses several times a week. A one-time Washington correspondent, he also serves as the self-described "Minister of Foreign Affairs" for the paper, representing Joong-ang Ilbo in its many interactions with foreign think tanks and other outside organizations with which Joong-ang has relationships. The fact that the mandatory retirement age at Joong-ang Ilbo is 55 speaks to the value his organization places on Mr. Kim's talents. Next year in fact, Mr. Kim will celebrate 50 years as a journalist, a record unlikely to soon, if ever, be broken.

¶3. (SBU) The discussion quickly turned to the ongoing Korean hostage situation in Afghanistan. Citing an editorial appearing that morning in Dong-A Ilbo and similar editorials and op-ed pieces that had appeared in Chosun Ilbo and Joong-ang Ilbo over the past several days, Mr. Kim said that the mainstream media, which he described with the neologism "CHOJOONGDONG" (CHOsun Ilbo, JOONG-ang Ilbo and DONG-a Ilbo), had made a conscious decision not to let the fringe media and political activists steal the issue in order to bludgeon the U.S. as they had in the heat of the 2002 Korean presidential election campaign.

¶4. (SBU) Asked if journalists from the three papers had actually had a meeting about this strategy, Mr. Kim said not as such, but it was the kind of concern that senior journalists discussed over coffee and on the fringes of any number of receptions and meetings on other topics. Thus, while there had been nothing as overt as a coordinating session to work out a common strategy, there was at all three papers, he said, a serious determination not to let this issue be hijacked, and hence the prominence of several editorials and op-ed pieces of the previous week or so arguing that responsibility for the hostage crisis did not lie with the U.S.

¶5. (SBU) Mr. Kim said journalists at the "big three" newspapers were acutely aware that the distorted coverage of the accidental deaths

of the two Korean school girls in 2002 was a key factor in the election results that year. He said the mistakes the papers made in 2002 were that (1) they were distracted by other stories, mainly the election itself, and (2) they drastically underestimated the potential of that story as a vehicle with which to hammer at the U.S. and the U.S.-ROK alliance and influence the election. According to Mr. Kim, the mainstream media were not going to let this happen again, and so far Joong-ang Ilbo had followed that editorial line as had both Chosun Ilbo and Dong-a Ilbo.

¶16. (SBU) Recalling the emotion-laden meeting the Charge had had with the families of the hostages, the PAO noted that the family members present had expressed deep appreciation for the Embassy's concern and support, and that subsequently the family members had requested civic organizations and other progressive activists to refrain from demonstrations against and criticism of the U.S. Agreeing, Mr. Kim said that, in his view, the families, even in their grief, were acutely aware of the embarrassment to Korea this incident had caused and the tremendous burdens, financial and otherwise, their own government and fellow countrymen were being forced to assume on behalf of them and their loved ones. The last thing in the world these people wanted, Mr. Kim said, was to make the fate of the hostages a domestic political issue. Whether or not they would succeed in keeping the situation non-political, according to Mr. Kim, was not entirely in their hands, but he believed Korean society had learned a lot in the past few years and, despite wishes to the contrary among some quarters, he did not see the issue, whatever the outcome, rising to the level of the 2002 incident as a factor in this year's election.

¶17. (SBU) Comment: Post will continue to closely monitor domestic Korean media coverage of the hostage issue, but to date we are pleased to see that the mainstream media are, perhaps uncharacteristically, getting it right. End Comment.

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